

This recording contains the first and most recent examples of Andrew Violette's writing in piano sonata form. At first glance, Sonata 1 and Sonata 7 have little in common. Sonata 1 is a model of taut compression; Sonata 7 is a vast timescape nearly as long as the rest of Mr. Violette's piano sonatas put together (no mean claim, given that two of them each clock in at over an hour). Sonata 1 overtly utilizes serial techniques; Sonata 7 strikes one as tonal. Sonata 1 is based on classical sonata form; Sonata 7 is a minimalist composition. However, both sonatas do share a center tone, "A", and make pervasive use of the tritone interval. And, as a listener will soon discover, both bear unmistakable evidence of the musical gestures that are Mr. Violette's, and Mr. Violette's alone. Perhaps of most enduring significance, though, is the fact that both sonatas are products of a veteran musical imagination allied with an astounding, almost unparalleled physical capacity to play an instrument.

### ***Sonata 7***

Sonata 7 was composed in April and May 2001, in a white heat. It is a minimalist piece in terms of structure but lives in a sound world that can be characterized as neo-romantic. Clocking in at nearly three hours, and covering 92 pages of manuscript score, Sonata 7 is undoubtedly one of the longest piano sonatas in existence. It is written in two parts, each with 13 sections, for a total of 26 distinct, but continuous, sections. The sections vary in time from 42 seconds to 27 minutes, each part being as long as it has to be to fit well into the musical mosaic. The impetus for the composition of the sonata is best stated in the composer's own words.

In 1998 I experienced an artist who was very influential to my work. Richard Serra installed his monumental Torqued Ellipses at the Dia Center in New York City. These pieces were huge, cast iron sheets. I had to walk around them, through them and in them to experience them fully. I thought, "Serra totally changed what sculpture *is*; he radically redefined how space is perceived. This is what I must do in *my* work: redefine how time is perceived in music."

For his part, Serra was influenced by Sol LeWitt. In Sentences on Conceptual Art LeWitt said, "Successful art changes our understanding of the conventions by altering our perceptions." That's what happened to me when I walked through the Torqued Ellipses. My conception was changed because the conventions were so radically altered.

The second thing LeWitt said was, "If the artist changes his mind midway through the execution of the piece he compromises the result and repeats past results." For this reason it was important for me not to say in my mind, "This section is too long; it's getting boring." Rather I thought, "How much time does this section need to musically unfold?"

In Sonata 7, as in all Mr. Violette's works, a wide range of musical techniques (e.g., serialism, secondal harmony, modes, clusters, Gregorian chant, tonalism) is put at the service of the prevailing form, according to the aesthetic judgment of the composer. The listener experiences a sense of variety-in-unity and unity-in-variety that is beautiful, and which becomes more beautiful upon repeated exposure.

What Mr. Violette achieves in *Sonata 7*, though, is quite remarkable. He conceives a series of motives that are inter-related yet distinct, and that etch themselves into the listener's ear after only one hearing. Then, as these motives return at various points, they serve as important landmarks to preserve unity throughout the piece. For example, the opening motive, a rising interval of a minor sixth and the falling of a minor second (F to E, over a held A), is instantly recognized whenever it is recapped. [Insert musical example 1, of first measure of score].

Virtually all the thematic material for the sonata is presented in the opening Adagio, *Adagio I*. Thematic transformations abound and are done with great economy and ease. For example, the Gregorian chant-like phrase in *Adagio I* [Insert musical example 2, of measures 75-84] becomes the jumping off point for the ensuing Dance. [Insert musical example 3, of measures 106-110]

Now let's take a quick walk through the Sonata.

The opening section, *Adagio I*, begins with the aforementioned A-F-E motive. With one exception (a Db/C# coloring a sequence of C major chords) this section is played entirely on the white keys. The sonorities are crisp, clear and finely etched, but also meditative and hypnotic. It begins like a chaconne, but it is not really heard that way because the durations are so long. For contrast, a Gregorian chant-like phrase is introduced, which leads to the next section, *Dance*. Five beats to the bar is the predominant meter in the *Dance*. The sounds revolve around A, C and F major, though tritones appear prominently in the filigree passages. The opening elements are varied and repeated using different colors and chords. The *Dance* ends with a white-note tone cluster, the first of several instances in the piece. Clusters are always white-note in this sonata. They serve as "interruptions" to bring back the listener's attention, but also function as structural elements, recapping in a highly compressed way the sound of the opening Adagio. Later in the piece, clusters function as a thematic element in their own right.

Repeated double octave E's lead to *Adagio II*. *Adagio II* has a key signature of G#. Thus, it tends to gravitate to the chords of E and F major, and, a and d minor. The E's from the *Dance* are carried through and developed amidst full, massive and monolithic chords. Two more tone clusters interrupt *Adagio II*, which then continues with a melodic line spun so slowly that the sound seems more like a series of harmonies than a song. *Adagio II* leads to a brief recap of *Adagio I*, in different rhythms.

The fifth section is a *Chaconne*, about 20 minutes in length. Starting with double-dotted rhythms, and with Bb in the key signature, the *Chaconne* stands on a thirteen-note descending bass and harmonies that center on Bb and C major, and, g and d minor. A new counter melody emerges over the double-dotted rhythms that is reminiscent of the *Dance*. [Insert musical examples 4 and 5, measures 112-113 and 615-617, respectively] A contrasting middle section with G# and Bb in the key signature offers a more impressionistic wash of sound, hovering over the following harmonies: C augmented, E and F major, and, d and f minor. This section ends with three tone clusters. The first part

of the *Chaconne* is then recapitulated, but with smoother rhythms that gradually speed up, covering the entire keyboard and leading to a virtuosic climax. Five tone clusters end the *Chaconne*. Section six is a brief *Refrain* in big, heavy chords, sounding somewhat Spanish, in the same key signature as *Adagio II*. There follows a *Chant in Three Parts*, taken from Mr. Violette's experiences as a monk, during which he would chant seven times every day. The first part presents the six chant phrases in chords, key signature G# (*Adagio II*). The second part changes the key signature to a Bb (*Chaconne*), and has the chant played in rhythmically varied octaves. The third part introduces a drone on pitch D over which the chant is harmonized. The *Chant* concludes with long drawn out repeated chords followed by eight tone clusters (the number of tone clusters at the end of sections follow a Fibonacci series – 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, etc., in which the new number is obtained by adding the two previous numbers). The *Chant* is followed by a varied return of the *Refrain*, in the same key as before. This time, though, the refrain ends with a bridge passage consisting of the opening of *Adagio I* (A-F-E, with the E trilled) followed by the descending bass from the *Chaconne*.

The ninth and tenth sections (*The Song Deconstructed* and *Descending into the Abyss*) are a unit. *The Song Deconstructed* (C# in key signature) is a series of eight bar phrases, each evolving from the one before. The song gains momentum from decreasing note values (i.e., the notes get faster) and the juxtaposition of the tonalities of A major and d# minor (a tritone apart). The descending half tone (F to E) from the sonata's opening also reappears as a significant accompaniment figure. The final phrase of *The Song Deconstructed* introduces a downward spiraling chromatic scale, which ushers in *Descending into the Abyss*. The sinking gets faster and faster and stops on an eb (d#) minor chord. A new melody is played in octaves, followed by a series of chromatically descending chords composed of tritones. The section ends with 13 tone clusters and a trill on A.

Section 11 is entitled *Colorfield I*. It refers to the paintings done by Mark Rothko (among others), a type of abstract art that consists of broad areas of unmodulated or low-contrast color on a very shallow picture plane. These paintings are not monochromatic but rather evince subtle gradations of a single texture. They shift ambiguously, hypnotically, before the eye. As Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb wrote in 1943, "We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth." That's what happens here. A "field" of all twelve possible minor chords, played by the left hand, forms an underlying harmonic fabric upon which is played filigree, in steady sixteenth notes, containing pitches that are not included in the minor chords being sounded. The left hand, however, gradually increases in speed from whole notes to sixteenth notes, including many uneven rhythmic divisions (e.g., 11 notes in the left hand against 16 notes in the right). Thus, the field of colors grows increasingly complex, but stays also the same due to the minor chord set of colors. The "new melody", cited above in the previous section, appears here, woven into the left hand part. After a sudden silence, there is an equally sudden report of 21 tone clusters. *Colorfield I* is one of the most technically challenging sections of Sonata 7 to perform.

*Colorfield I* is followed by section 12, a recapitulation of *Descending into the Abyss* with a recapitulation of the *Refrain*, the theme in the bass. This time the tone clusters, 34 of them, occur in the middle of the section. Section 13, *Clusters*, is devoted entirely to tone clusters, 283 of them, all precisely notated, all different. The rhythms are derived from the Fibonacci number series. The section ends with a trill on C#. *Clusters* concludes Part One of the Sonata. In some inexplicable way, *Clusters* seems a recap of everything that has gone before.

Part Two of Sonata 7 begins with section 14, *The Song Revisited (in 20 panels)*, a set of 20 variations on an eight-bar phrase derived from the opening of *The Song Deconstructed*, and the longest single section of the sonata (27 minutes). [Insert musical examples 6 and 7, measures A121-A123 and measures 710 and 711] If you're counting, the first statement of the phrase is also its first variation. Each panel contains eight measures, though the time it takes to play each panel varies because the number of notes in each measure varies by panel. Each panel has its own key signature and own shade of color. Different panels pick up pieces from earlier in the sonata. As examples, panel 11 harks back to the *Chant* and *Adagio I*; panel 12 relates to the *Dance*; panel 17 takes in *Descending into the Abyss* and the *Chant*. The *Chant* music continues through panel 18, then, in panel 19, it is joined by continuous tremolos in the high register and music from *Colorfield I* in the middle register. Panel 20 involves a continuous halo of tremolos in both hands over a low bass reminiscent of *The Song Deconstructed*. The section resolves in F major.

Sections 15 through 18 are all short, functioning both as recapitulation and transition between *The Song Revisited* and *Colorfield II*. Section 15, *Refrain*, is a montage-like bridge containing bits of *Refrain*, but also a preview of *Rocket Dance*. Section 16, *Stride Piano*, is a jazzy, Ivesian three minutes that utilizes clusters. It too contains references to *Rocket Dance*, *Refrain* and *Descending into the Abyss*. In section 17, the *Rocket Dance* takes off in earnest. Utilizing the highest and lowest registers of the piano yield a steely, almost electronic sound. The *Rocket Dance* contains references to the chromatic scales from *Descending into the Abyss*. It also casts a sidelong glance at the spaceship scene from Philip Glass's Einstein on the Beach. Section 18 is a recapitulation of *Descending into the Abyss* and *Stride Piano*, very dramatic and heavily chorded. It leads directly into section 19, *Colorfield II*.

*Colorfield II* is a Presto possible lasting over 11 minutes that places outrageous demands on the pianist, particularly given that he or she has been playing continuously for over two hours (but, anyone who has heard Mr. Violette perform his Sonata 7 live knows how easy it can sound). *Colorfield II* is a ribbon of sound in the same key as the *Chaconne*. It begins with a single line, just using the pitches within the key signature. Then the descending bass from the *Chaconne* appears as the runs continue. Slowly but surely, other pitches are added until all twelve tones are being used. This is analogous to the technique used in *Colorfield I* to gradually shift the color by adding notes to the patterns in the left hand. *Colorfield II* ends with a descending chromatic scale, as does *Descending into the Abyss*.

Three short sections follow *Colorfield II*: a recap of the *Rocket Dance*; a recap of *Stride Piano*; and, a recap of *The Song*. The form of the sonata is being rounded off.

Section 23 is new, *Adagio III*, a plaintive melody that contains seeds of *Adagio I*, *Clusters*, and a brief, but beautiful, slow reflection of *Rocket Dance*. Section 24 is an extended recomposition of *Adagio II*. Written on as many as five staves, the entire keyboard vibrates in bell-like sonorities. Octave E's and sometimes E's and F's (recalling the opening of *Adagio I*) are sounded as the bells toll. Tremolos and trills flash back to *The Song Revisited*. The penultimate section is a shortened return of *Adagio I*, with altered rhythms that intensify the mood. The sonata comes to an end with a return of *Adagio III*. Here again, the E-F motive from *Adagio I* appears, as does an even more slowed down quote from *Rocket Dance*. The tempo slows further to *Adagio molto*. The E-F dissonance is resolved as the sonata cadences for the final time, solemnly and softly, in a minor.

### ***Sonata 1***

Sonata 1 was composed in October and November 1978, when the composer was 24 years old, and is as concise as Sonata 7 is long. It was inspired by the boldness and virtuosity of the prolific early Beethoven. Like Beethoven's first forays into the piano sonata (his three sonatas, Op.2), Mr. Violette's Sonata 1 is part of a trio of piano sonatas, Sonatas 1-3, composed during 1978 and 1979. It can be performed alone or as part of a cycle with Sonatas 2 and 3, lasting a total of 90 minutes. Sonata 1 avails itself of classical forms and serial techniques. Though serial, it is a piece the ear can grab hold of. The tone "A" plays an important role as a quasi-tonal center. There is an opening Sonata-allegro, a Minuet, and a Largo followed immediately by a Rondo.

The first movement, *Allegro assai*, is a sonata-allegro requiring relentless virtuosity from the performer. The piano writing seems inspired to new heights by the most difficult passages of Beethoven's *Hammerklavier* sonata; it is dense, fast, covers the whole keyboard, but, at the same time, is transparent, requiring great clarity in performance. The opening theme, featuring Mr. Violette's trademark use of the tritone, is stated ascending in the left hand, accompanied by double notes in the right hand. A series of increasingly intense passages leads to an upward scale and a heavy chord in the bass (d minor). Bass chords then alternate with passagework from the opening of the movement. This is followed by a half-tempo section that develops material from the opening and leads to the second theme, chords that sound like they are in the key of c minor underlined by trills and tremolos in the left hand. An upward rushing scale leads to the development section, in which all the previous material is recombined, including a *Meno Mosso Cantabile* section that develops the second theme. The recapitulation begins with a varied and inverted version of the opening – the opening theme descends this time. This section culminates with some of the most widely spread four-part writing in the movement. A brief coda condenses the material heard earlier. A trill followed by two chords at opposite ends of the keyboard brings the movement to a close. The movement feels like it ends in f minor.

The second movement, *Menuetto – Allegretto*, is sparse and delicate, especially as compared with what has come before. It does, however, have some startling dynamic contrasts. The composer has stated he drew inspiration from the same-titled movement from Mozart's 40<sup>th</sup> Symphony. The *Trio* utilizes material from the *Meno Mosso Cantabile* section of the first movement, inverted this time. The *Menuetto* repeats and the movement concludes in what sounds like C major.

The third movement, *Largo*, is in essence a rondo in its own right, and forms an introduction to the last movement. A twelve-note row is stated in octaves. The row is suggestive of d minor/A major and G# minor/Major. After a pause, a quick tempo ensues (marked *Subito Duramente*) in which the first theme of the *Rondo* is stated in canon. After another pause there is a new section (marked *Grazioso*) containing beautiful four part writing that settles on an A major chord (seventh in the bass). The *Largo* tempo resumes with a partial statement of the opening row (the d minor portion). Then, the *Duramente* section resumes with another, more extended, statement of the *Rondo* theme, again in canon, but this time in octaves. Mirror writing is evident in this statement (i.e., the theme is played backwards). Another pause. The *Largo* tempo starts again with a statement of the opening row, in backwards order. There is a final cadence that sounds to the ear as if it resolves in D. The next movement is attacked immediately.

The fourth movement, *Rondo – Allegro Deciso*, makes heavy use of imitative writing. It opens with the theme first stated in the second section of the *Largo*, in canon. The beginning upward leap of a minor tenth (Eb to F#) is easy to spot. A running sixteenth note figure follows, also in canon, to complete the first theme, which, like the first section of the first movement, ends with a heavy chord in the bass. The second theme is characterized by trills, trill-like figures and tremolos, punctuated at the end by two loud chords. The third theme, marked *Grazioso*, offers a delicate contrast to the aggressive, forward-thrusting themes that came before. The fourth theme is marked *Poco Piu Mosso (Tempo Giusto)*; it has leaps alternating with quick running passages, trills, and a veiled reference to the *Rondo's* first theme in the left hand. Passagework at the very upper end of the keyboard, recalling the double notes that started the sonata, acts as a transition to a reiteration of the first theme, followed by the second theme, which cadences on a G. Theme 5 is new, but also is a direct reference to the second theme of the first movement. Theme 6 is soft and subtle, a perfumed twelve-tone music box that cadences on a very loud tritone (A-Eb). Then, the first theme is restated one last time. The movement concludes with a coda marked *Ben Marcato, Con Brio*. In it, a variant of the fourth theme is followed by a direct reference to the sonata's opening.

The last three sounds in Sonata 1 are interesting: the highest and lowest notes on the piano; an eleven note chord that contains all pitches except G#; and an unambiguous A major triad. Why the penultimate chord leaves out the leading tone G#, and why the sonata ends so clearly in A major are questions for future generations of musical theorists to answer.